What is Theory?

By: William David Hart

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Abstract:

Believing and Acting (2012) is equally erudite and witty. Known for his good humor, Davis uses wit to make the medicine he dispenses go down more easily. For the patient—that is, scholars engaged in the study of religion who are concerned about proper "methods and approaches"—the prognosis is rather good. But Davis's wit, I suspect, may also encourage us to move too quickly past some of the claims that he makes. I wish to explore one such claim, namely, his assertion that the study of religion does not need theory. I consider myself a critical theorist of religion, so my engagement with Davis's argument is not merely business, it's personal. Though heartfelt, I should hope that the last sentence is taken with a grain of humor. To preview my argument, I shall offer a negative assessment of Davis's claim about the utility of theory in the study of religion.

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Before exploring this point of disagreement, let me say why *Believing and Acting* is such a good book, the reading of which is time well spent. Davis is a new style comparativist whose

enterprise is not burdened by the essentialist ambitions and the rank-ordering of traditions that characterize older models. He has a light touch that envelops a seriousness of purpose, a verve that makes for easy reading. He moves easily from a discussion of Peirce's anti-Cartesian epistemology and antiskeptical conception of truth to the implications of Richard Rorty's neopragmatism for the study of religion. Davis is impressed by Rorty's critique of twentieth-century philosophical empiricism and by the contributions of pragmatists such Wayne Proudfoot, despite Proudfoot's misreading of Rorty as hostile to scientific inquiry and the Peircean notion of truth. From this critique, Davis distills three points that scholars can apply to those with ambitions of providing a grand theory of religion: first, scientistic foundationalism is incoherent; second, norms and descriptions are fluid; and third, historical predictability is limited by duration and scope (2012, 96). Armed with these insights, the student of religion is less likely to make the kind of errors that too often bedevil those with grand theoretical ambitions.

By the end of Davis's itinerary, the reader has been treated to comparative analyses of methods and approaches to the study of religion, ethics, and art. This is all good stuff, which grabs the reader's attention and focuses his or her thought. But Davis is at his best in chapter 5, which assesses the current vogue for cognitive studies of religion, and in chapter 8, where he provides a comparative analysis of the ethics of abortion and the use of prenatal stem cells for research and therapy. Davis shows why cognitive approaches to the study of religion are not especially promising, why their explanatory ambitions vastly exceed the likely results. He identifies a number of problems with this approach, such as conflating metaphors with biological processes, causal relations with intentionality, and abstract languages with the quotidian, hurly burly, and idiosyncratic nature (the idiolects) of actual languages. These practices underwrite the search for a cognitive infrastructure that explains universalities in religious practices, beliefs, and experiences. The proponents of the cognitive approach want to identify this repertory. Davis is deeply skeptical. If there is a "universal religious repertoire," it is likely to be highly abstract and vague—trivial in terms of explanatory import. Now high-level abstractions can be important. They are useful for certain kinds of analyses, where such abstraction is functional. But the detailed and nuanced explanations of particular religious traditions gained from ethnographic and historical studies, with their mind-boggling internal varieties, are likely to outpace (under any scenario I can imagine) anything that cognitive approaches might provide. Such approaches are destined to be supplements, sideshows to the main event: the careful work—ethnographic and historical—of the religion scholar.

In chapter 8, Davis takes up the "contentious moral debate" regarding abortion and stem cells. He explores radical differences in ethical perception among Christians, Jews, and Japanese Buddhists regarding the moral status of prenatal life. While none regard such life (blastocyst, embryo, or fetus) as trivial, they have different views of how it should be treated. These differences have much to do with diverse judgments regarding when "human life" begins, when—before or after birth—a fetus becomes a "fully vested member of the human community." For some Christians, investment occurs before birth. For some Buddhists and most

Jews, investment is after birth. For the latter, to cut up the fetus, “piece by piece, and remove it from a woman’s body is not murder” (Davis 2012, 186). For some Christians, however, such an act is murder. Though “a full, and fully choice-worthy, human life” cannot be lived without birth, these traditions disagree about the moral status of prenatal life (187). Davis concludes that there is no consensus about how our treatment of fetuses affects “the common good” (197). Regarding the ethics of abortion, he adopts an after-birth view, arguing that the pre-birth position is hard to defend without introducing theological and metaphysical claims he finds no compelling reasons to endorse (197–98). In late 2011, a ballot initiative was put before voters in the state of Mississippi that would have defined a fertilized egg as a person. Had it been successful, the fertilized egg would have the same rights and legal protection as other persons. Abortion and the use of some contraceptives would be redefined as murder (Editorial 2011). This, of course, is the logical extension of the contemporary pre-birth position. For prudential reasons, Davis thinks that, we should avoid such logic. I wish to endorse his position. It is well argued and compelling. Davis, however, is under no illusion that his position, though well argued, will resolve the controversy or persuade those for whom theological and metaphysical views, of the kind he declines to endorse, are compelling.

In the remainder of this review, I address Davis’s critique of theory in the study of religion. Davis presents his thesis as follows:

> My argument will be that understanding religion requires nothing more than the sensitive and imaginative reading of human phenomena informed by the best available ethnography set in the best available historical narrative. The fruitful arguments to be had are about the details of reading, fieldwork, and narrative, and the best way to understand rival approaches is as suggestions for what we should pay attention to in telling the stories we tell about believing and acting.
>
> (2012, 3)

Davis’s claim is compelling. I find nothing objectionable except, perhaps, the suggestion that theorists of religion are not already doing what he proposes. Theorists might disagree with Davis on particulars, but there is no reason to think that they would disagree with his general account. Of course there are scientistic outliers (to use a scientific term), scholars who pretend that they can get the same kind of purchase on their object of study that a physicist or chemist can get on theirs. But these are clearly exceptions. When most scholars speak of theorizing religion, they are not doing what Davis condemns. Indeed, I would be so bold as to suggest that those who practice what Davis denounces represent a distinct minority. So what exactly is Davis’s “beef”?

Davis runs together things that can stand alone and, perhaps, should be kept apart. At the very least, there are things that need to be carefully distinguished. Such is the case when he herds together—without proper attention to species—postmodernism, cognitive accounts of religion, cultural studies, and theory. Indeed, *theory* appears to be an all-purpose cover term for the others.

In 1996, physicist Alan Sokal perpetrated a hoax when a he published an article in *Social Text* full of gobbledygook, designed to expose the scientific ignorance of those in cultural studies. Despite the black eye left by the Sokal Affair, an important strain of cultural studies is science studies, which shares Davis's critique of scientific explanatory imperialism. In this regard, cultural studies critics are on "all fours" with Davis in ferreting out bad uses of science, including cognitive science.

Davis is aware of the fact that there are different uses of the term *theory*. But he seems partial to the "deductive-nomological" conception that he associates with logical positivism and the natural sciences. He appears to take this conception of theory as theory *simpliciter*. Any conception of theory that does not conform to this model is vacuous. Davis is entitled to his account of theory, but it is not clear why anyone else should accept it. I do not accept his view. There are few people working in the humanities who construct "theory" the way Davis does. For them (or perhaps I should say, "for us"), theory is not a matter of deductive, lawlike relations. This is especially true for those of us in religious studies. Theory quite simply is an eclectic toolkit that helps the analyst to get a critical purchase on a first-order enterprise, whether that is the study of religion or anything else. This toolkit includes forms of rhetorical and narrative analysis pioneered in biblical criticism, hermeneutics, and comparative literature. It also includes an assortment of tools developed in anthropology, sociology, linguistics, and philosophy, among other disciplines. In fact, a great deal of theory is "traveling philosophy," that is, concepts that have traveled from the domain of philosophy, proper and professional, into the "wild, wild west" of theory. In the interdisciplinary domain of theory, the scholar is simultaneously "professional" and "amateur" (witness the way that Davis enriches his expert knowledge of religious studies and ethics with the amateur's knowledge of art criticism). As in all things, some are better at what they do than others, enriching both their professional and amateur expertise. I think that Davis knows this. So there must be something else motivating his construction of theory, something that needs to be made explicit.

This can be a little difficult given his equivocal use of the term. *Theory* appears to be a synonym both for postmodern theory and for grand theories of religion. Though he criticizes it, Davis clearly subscribes to a highly influential grand theory of religion. This is the theory associated with Durkheim. However critical he may be of theory's utility in the study of religion, Davis has a working theory of religion that is informed by the Durkheimian tradition of social theory. So Davis must have something else in mind when speaking disparagingly of theory. We get a sense of what that might be in a passage where Davis responds to the views of Tomoko Masuzawa and Robert Sharf, contributors to *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*. Masuzawa and Sharf employ a hermeneutics of suspicion in their respective analyses of "culture" and "experience," and exemplify critical dispositions, methods, and approaches Davis finds objectionable:

The moral of the story is not simply that we should be careful not to allow the comfortable presuppositions of the domineering West to skew our interpretations, but that it is almost impossible for us to avoid reproducing, intellectually, the colonizing moment in our

interpretations of the non-Western world without the postmodern therapy of “cultural studies,” “museum studies,” “colonial and post-colonial studies,” or something else of the sort (ibid., 89). Once we have been freed from our oppressive and oppressing intellectual legacy, we will be able to appreciate these other cultures on their own terms.

(2012, 9)

There are several things to say about this remark. First, *postmodernism* is a controversial term often applied to scholars who reject the label. Second,*postmodernism* is a term of both praise and abuse: Jean Francois Lyotard is pro, Fredrick Jameson is contra. Davis is also opposed to the term*postmodernism*, but his reasons are different from Jameson’s. These complexities matter. It is incumbent upon the critic to clarify the how the term is being used in a particular case. Though Davis is not explicit regarding “the problem,” we can make some reasonable inferences. Davis regards the various critical discourses that he herds under *postmodernism* and *theory* as defensive maneuvers that block the Peircean road of inquiry. They rule certain questions out of court with a kind of “reverse ethnocentrism”—Occidentalism. Undoubtedly, there are postmodernist and cultural studies scholars who are guilty as charged. But there is nothing about this defective mode of inquiry that is peculiar to postmodern theory. Peircean critics can block inquiry too. A preference for simplicity and elegance (Davis’s approach is both) can sometimes block the road of inquiry, reducing skeptical and uncomfortable questions to the status of “therapy.” Somehow, I do not think Davis means “Wittgensteinian therapy.” Wittgenstein remarks, “The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose” (2001, 127). Substitute *theorist* for *philosopher* and you get a good description (though not a complete description) of what theorists of religion do. Merely because something is simple does not mean that it is easy. Theorists of religion remind us that doing good ethnography (consider the history of anthropology and sociology) and good history (consider the historiography of American slavery as done by U. B. Phillips, Stanley Elkins, etc.) are not easy. They remind us of the insidious ways that culture and social structure influence our accounts.

Contra Davis, metaphors *are* theories. As forms of *theoria*, metaphors orient perception: how we see, imagine, and speculate about things. They influence the way we think. This is the aboriginal notion of theory, and the one that informs the work of most theorists of religion. Nonetheless, Davis persistently implies that such theorists intend to make deductive-nomological arguments, but are inept at doing so. Such is the case with Thomas Tweed’s *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (2006). Tweed does not make a deductive-nomological argument. Nor did he intend to do so. Davis acknowledges as much—after initially suggesting that Tweed’s theory fails as a deductive lawlike argument. But the acknowledgment is oblique, coming as it does in the form of an argumentative shift. Treating Tweed as a proxy for John Dewey, Davis attempts to sustain his argumentative momentum by railing against Dewey’s notion of truth as “warranted assertability,” while advocating what Davis regards as Peirce’s less equivocal notion. Pragmatists have debated these competing notions of truth (if in fact they are competitors) ad nauseam. Unlike some contemporary Peirceans, Dewey does not see a tension between Peirce’s

account of truth, which Dewey endorses, and his own notion of warranted assertability (Hildebrand 2003, 137). Regarding the nature of truth, contemporary patrons of Peirce and Dewey seem to miscast the debate. In a similar manner, Davis mischaracterizes Tweed's view. Davis's critique of the nature and utility of theory in the study of religion does not accomplish what he professes.

I do not see a substantive difference between Tweed and Davis. Davis might respond that this is precisely his point: Tweed's theory is irrelevant to his actual practice. But I do not think this is true. I suspect that Davis's disagreement is more verbal than substantive. What happens if we employ David Chalmers's "method of elimination" to determine whether Davis's disagreement with Tweed is merely verbal? The basic idea is to eliminate use of the key term, in this case *theory*, and "determine whether any substantive dispute remains" (Chalmers 2011, 526–27). If I were to pursue such an analysis, then, following Chalmers's account, I would bar the use of the term *theory*, try to identify accounts of the study of religion where Davis and Tweed disagree nonverbally about what such study entails, and determine whether the dispute regarding theory is merely verbal, or whether there is a substantive dispute lurking about. The constraints of space do not allow me to pursue that analysis here. But I'll reiterate my suspicion: though there are stylistic and rhetorical differences between Tweed and Davis, there is no substantive disagreement: the difference is primarily verbal.

If the term *theory* is a synonym for epistemological skepticism, then Davis is right: "we don't need 'theory' but we do need 'truth'" (2012, 20). But there is no more reason to accept Davis's account of theory than there is to accept postmodern skepticism regarding truth. It is more accurate to say that we need theory because truth is theory-laden. Davis's critique of theory in the study of religion may be nothing more than an exuberant effusion, a rhetorical flourish. I choose to regard it as such. It can be excised without affecting the cogency of his simple and elegant account of how to study religion.

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